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AUTHOR Toomey, Derek
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ABSTRACT

The influence of informal literacy learning during the preschool years was studied. Preschool teachers in 4 low-income areas read to their classes regularly in an effort to make students enthusiastic about reading. Teachers were also asked to visit families in particular need of help. Three books were sent home with each child twice a week, and parents were asked to read to their children. The study sample included an experimental group of 55 families and a comparison group of 36 families. Results were measured using the Sulzby test of emergent literacy development as a pre- and posttest, tests of word and letter recognition, other measures of literary competence, and mothers' reports of literacy development. In addition, each child's mother was interviewed about the literacy environment of the home before the project began. The experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group on the Sulzby posttest and the performance tests of early literacy competence. When combined, factors such as family literacy environment, the child's interest in reading and writing, parental illiteracy, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the child's initial literacy competence did not make a significant contribution to performance on the Sulzby posttest. It was recommended that schools make a direct approach to families early in the child's school career if signs of potential reading problems appear. (AC)

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WORKING WITH PRE-SCHOOL TEACHERS AND PARENTS TO IMPROVE THE EMERGENT LITERACY COMPETENCE OF FOUR YEAR OLDS IN A DISADVANTAGED LOCALITY

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Derek Toomey,

Centre for the Study of Community, Education and Social Change

La Trobe University

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There is voluminous evidence of the strong influence on children's school learning of their general upbringing within the family (Hess and Holloway, 1983; Toomey, 1989a). There is also good evidence of the effectiveness of schools deliberately involving parents in teaching school knowledge to their children at home (e.g. Graue et al., 1983). As far as literacy learning goes there is substantial evidence of the former kind (e.g. Teale, 1985), but not a great deal of the latter (McCormick and Mason, 1986). The West Heidelberg Early Literacy Project has been attempting to provide evidence of this kind since it began in 1987. It has concentrated on families of four year olds in a disadvantaged locality, as being particularly likely to benefit. Some success has been gained by a) working through home visits (Sloane and Toomey, 1988) and b) by working in pre-schools (Toomey and Sloane, 1991). In both instances the project supplied books to parents to read to their children, and gave advice on other methods of fostering literacy development. Deliberate teaching of the child was not involved.

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A major aim of the project has been to establish a low cost method that can be widely employed. Using home visits, and someone to visit pre-schools to manage the program both are relatively costly and in 1990 we repeated the pre-school based program (Toomey

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and Sloane, 1991) but asked the pre-school teachers to carry it out. This paper reports that work.

Increasingly research into literacy development has been paying attention to the influence of informal literacy learning which takes place in the pre-school years as a result of activities such as children observing print in use (Teale, 1985, 1986), observing print in the environment (Goodman, 1986) and being read stories (Teale, 1985, 1986; Wells, 1981).

A great deal of knowledge necessary for proficient reading may be learnt by the child in this way, e.g. knowledge of concepts about print (Clay, 1979), familiarity with the language of books (Teale, 1985, 1986) and familiarity with decontextualised meanings (Snow, 1983). The term 'emergent literacy' (Teale and Sulzby 1986) has been coined to refer to this stage of informal learning. Certainly, there is good evidence that reading to children in the pre-school years facilitates subsequent literacy development (Teale, 1985, 1986; Wells, 1981).

The fundamental philosophy of the project emphasises the role of the family as educator (Walberg, 1984) and the fact that family environment processes are more influential than socio-economic status in influencing children's scholastic learning (Hess and Holloway, 1983; Share et al., 1987; Toomey, 1989a). It also stresses the need to reach out to lower SES families in order to support their involvement in their children's education (Toomey, 1989b; Sloane and Toomey, 1988).

In a previous program (Sloane and Toomey, 1988) we found that the child's enjoyment of being read to was a crucial factor in encouraging lower SES parents to become involved

in reading to their children. A regular supply of good books, especially short books, we also found to be important.

The approach to emergent literacy development taken in the project emphasises the development of the child from responses to oral language representations of print (as in parents reading aloud) towards responses more oriented to print as written language and to the distinctiveness of print (e.g. 'reading' with a reading aloud intonation, pointing to print, recognition of own name in print). As the child becomes more familiar with the reading process, it begins to pay more attention to the print (Harkness and Miller, 1982). In the initial phase of the project, reading with expression was thought to be especially important, but in the later stages opportunities for familiarity with particular printed texts became more important.

Methods

Pre-school teachers in four low-income areas read to the children in their class regularly, attempting to enthuse them about reading. Reading to the whole class was used, as well as reading to individuals and to small groups. Three books were sent home with each child twice a week and the parents were asked to read to their children and were sent a pamphlet explaining the advantages of this for their children's literacy development. It was hoped that the children's enthusiasm would lead them to put pressure on their parents to read to them.

There is a good deal of evidence to suggest the strong value for literacy development of the child becoming very familiar with some books (Snow, 1983; Snow, Dubber and de Blauw, 1982; Martinez and Teale, 1988; Morrow, 1988; Moerk, 1985; Dowhower, 1987)

and of having repetitive elements within books (Martinez and Teale, 1988). The argument is that the familiarity and redundancy involved encourages the child's mastery. Accordingly, after a phase in which encouraging the child's interest was paramount, the project moved to a phase, during the last seven weeks of the program, in which the child was given much contact with a small number of books. The teachers introduced class sets of short books, with repetitive elements, reading them aloud to the children several times, using a 'big book' version and sending a copy of the book home with each child. Some five books were introduced to each child in this way.

We worked from June to December, 1990; one of the pre-schools was deliberately chosen to have a high proportion of first generation immigrant families. A total of 55 families were involved. We also used a comparison group of 36 families drawn from the same pre-schools, which had been used in the previous year of the project (Toomey and Sloane, 1991).

We used identical measures to evaluate the home backgrounds and literacy competences and development in both the project and comparison families.

MEASURES USED:

Literacy Competence

The children were tested in the pre-school using the Sulzby test of emergent literacy development (Sulzby, 1985). This involves the child pretending to 'read', to an adult, a book of their choice, familiar to them. The reading is video-taped and the child's performance classified on a twelve category hierarchy from simple labelling activity to independent reading. The hierarchy reflects the transition from oral-language related

responses to print-governed responses mentioned above. The Sulzby test was administered at the beginning and end of the program. In addition, the children were tested at the end of the program by asking them to choose one of the five 'familiar' books we had used, though this test was not carried out with the comparison group.

Other tests of literacy competence used in the pre-school were: letter recognition, ability to read and write own name, recognition of environmental print with and without logo and concepts about print. We also used mothers' reports of: the child's ability to write his/her name, recognition of environmental print, letter recognition, alphabet knowledge and the number of words he or she could write.

Family interview

Shortly after the commencement of the project, each child's mother was interviewed at home and was asked to give an account of the literacy environment of the home before the project commenced, using a structured interview. From the information obtained, various scales were developed, which are listed below, with the number of items and coefficients previously established (Toomey and Sloane, 1991).

Family Literacy environment (α = .7667; 11 items)

A scale indicating the supportiveness of the family environment for the child's literacy development. Examples are: frequency of reading to children, amount of parent-child interaction in reading episodes, family library membership, mothers reading of books.

SES (α = .7685; 5 items)

Parents' education and occupations were the main items.

Child's interest in reading and writing (α = .7250; 11 items)

Examples: looks at books while alone, incorporates books into play, asks to borrow and buy books, asks to write.

Parental Illiteracy

A scale indicating the number of parents having reading difficulties in the family (0, 1, 2).

Ethnicity (α = .82; items = 4)

Child's country of birth, parents' country of birth; mother's spoken language fluency; mother's ability to read English. (Information from the pre-school teachers was used for this scale). Low scores indicate mainstream characteristics.

Initial Literacy competences (α = .8169; 9 items);

Ability to read and write name, asking of questions during reading episodes, recognition of environmental print, number of words can write, alphabet knowledge and letter recognition. (Items both from the performance tests and the mothers' reports were used).

One departure from the 1989 model was that in addition, at the post-test, we repeated the performance measures of literacy competence used in the pre-test. We then compared the children's performance on these tests and on the Sulzby post-test with the performance of children from a nearby pre-school, using a post-test only comparison (n = 42). For this comparison a five item scale was developed from the performance tests, with an alpha reliability of .81.

Results

An analysis of variance was conducted comparing the project and comparison groups in their performance on the Sulzby post-test, controlling for the following co-variates: Family literacy environment, child's interest in reading and writing, parental illiteracy, ethnicity, socio-economic status and the child's initial literacy competence. Table 1 sets out the results, showing that the project group scored significantly higher. Table 1 also shows that most of the co-variates did not make a significant contribution to performance on the Sulzby post-test. Table 2 reports a repeat of the analysis, leaving out the non-significant co-variates, for the sake of economy. The results remain substantially unchanged.

On the post-test only comparison, Table 3 shows that the project group performed significantly better on both the Sulzby post-test and the performance tests of early literacy competence.

Table 4 illustrates the results further by showing the distribution of oral-language-like and written language like responses in the project and comparison groups. The results show that the groups not involved in the project were rather unlikely to produce written language-like responses, compared with the second comparison group.

Discussion

The results do support some benefits for children's literacy development of a pre-school based early literacy program using parents to read to their children. There is evidence of effects on children's emergent literacy competences and on their word and letter recognition skills. Furthermore, our follow-up to the 1989 project has shown the Sulzby test to be predictive of children's literacy competences in the first year of school, as assessed by teachers, using the Griffin Literacy Profile. Longer range follow-up studies have yet to come.

However, we were not very successful in persuading teachers to make home visits to those families particularly in need of support. Though using pre-school teachers to run such a program is likely to be particularly cost-effective, it is unlikely to provide the support needed for some families most in need of it. This is a particularly thorny problem (Toomey, 1989b), since some of the children most in need of this kind of help are least likely to get it. One solution lies in making a direct approach to such families early in the school career of their child, if the child has shown early signs of being likely to encounter reading problems. Research suggests that once parents recognise a problem with their child's reading they become very willing to be actively involved (Toomey, 1991), so a direct approach by schools early in the piece seems a worthwhile strategy.

Table 1: Comparison of Project and 1st Comparison Group on Sulzby post-test controlling for the child's initial competence/interest and home background: analysis of variance.

	Mean	
	Project Group	1st Comparison Group
	4.68 (n = 50)	3.69 (n = 32)
Adjusted for independents and co-variates	.38	- .59

Co-variates	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F.
Sulzby pre-test	34.589	16.012	.000
Ethnicity	1.532	.709	.402
Child's initial competence	.345	.160	.691
Child's initial interest	9.997	4.628	.035
Family literacy environment	3.201	1.482	.227
SES	.369	.171	.681
Parental illiteracy	1.621	.750	.389
Main effects			
Group	15.886	7.354	.008

Table 2: Comparison of Project and lst Comparison Group on Sulzby post-test controlling for: Sulzby Pre-test and child's interest in reading and writing.

	Mean	
	Project Group	lst Comparison Group
	4.75 (N = 55)	3.69 (N = 32)
Adjusted for independents and co-variates	.30	- .52

Co-variates	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F
Sulzby Pre-test	61.043	26.879	.000
Child's interest in reading and writing	27.742	12.215	.001
Main effects			
Group	13.309	5.860	.018

Table 3: Post-test only comparison with second comparison group on Sulzby post-test and performance test scale

Outcome Variable	Mean Project Group	Mean 2nd Comparison Group
Sulzby	4.71 (n = 56)	3.79 (n = 38)
Literacy performance test scale	0.13 (n = 57)	0.18 (n = 42)

Main effect		Mean square	F	Sig. of F.
Group				
a)	Sulzby	19.362	6.604	.012
b)	Literacy performance test scale	2.241	4.519	.036

Table 4: Comparison of various groups on distribution of Sulzby post-test scores

	%			
	Project Groups		Comparison Groups	
	1989	1990	1989	1990
Oral language-like responses	42.4	65.1	91.5	84.3
Written language-like responses	57.5	34.0	8.7	15.6
	99.9	99.1	100.2	99.9

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